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ABSTRACT

This study examined individual differences in young children's understanding of emotion and potential correlates in the domain of family experiences. Participating in the study were 49 children, ages 40 to 75 months from a predominately white, middle to upper class sample. Self-report questionnaires concerning the expression of emotion, management of marital conflict, and marital satisfaction were obtained from the mothers of children who had been given an assessment of their ability to label negative emotions and talk about hidden negative emotions. Children's facial expressions to the presentation of an emotionally evocative puppet vignette were also assessed. The results indicated that individual differences in children's understanding of negative emotions were related to specific dimensions of family experiences. The data provide support for the notion that specific family experiences are related to key aspects of early emotion understanding. (Contains 12 references.) (Author/KB)

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Family Experiences and Early Emotion Knowledge

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Abstract

This study examined individual differences in young children's understanding of emotion and potential correlates in the domain of family experiences. Self-report questionnaires concerning the expression of emotion, management of marital conflict, and marital satisfaction were obtained from the mothers of children who had been given an assessment of their ability to label negative emotions and talk about hidden negative emotions. Children's facial expressions to the presentation of an emotionally evocative puppet vignette were also assessed. Results indicated that individual differences in children's understanding of negative emotions were related to specific dimensions of family experiences. The data provide support for the notion that specific family experiences are related to key aspects of early emotion understanding.

Introduction

Across early childhood, children develop the ability to accurately identify emotions and increase their understanding of how emotions are associated with other aspects of mental life, behavior and context. Additionally, children learn strategies for managing the display and experience of emotion (Denham, 1998). It is assumed that the developmental progression of these social cognitive abilities assists the child in managing interpersonal interactions, (Denham, 1986; Kopp, 1982; 1989), and it is therefore important to identify possible determiners of individual differences in emotion understanding. Although the family is not the only socialization agent present in a child's life, it may be one of the most salient with respect to influencing the developing child's understanding of emotion. Thus, the present study examined how different aspects of family functioning related to specific measures of children's understanding of emotions. Self-report questionnaires concerning the expression of emotion, management of marital conflict, and marital satisfaction were obtained from the mothers of children who had been given an assessment of their ability to label negative emotions and talk about hidden emotions. Children's facial expressions to the presentation of an emotionally evocative puppet vignette were also assessed.

Method

Participants

- 49 children (18 girls & 31 boys)
- Ages 40 to 75 months ($M = 60.4$ months)
- Predominately white, middle to upper-class
-

Family Questionnaires

- **Self-Expressiveness in the Family Questionnaire** (SEFQ: Halberstadt et al., 1995) Used to measure children's exposure to positive and negative emotional expressiveness in the home.
- **Short Marital Adjustment Test** (SMAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959); Used to assess mothers' appraisal of the quality of their marital relationship.
- **Conflict Tactics Scale** (CTS: Straus, 1979) Used to assess interparental hostility.

Emotion Understanding Tasks

- **Puppet vignettes: Negative Emotion labeling task and facial expression of sympathy and personal distress** - Children watched two videotapes about puppets engaged in real-life emotionally evocative situations. Each puppet vignette consisted of an emotionally evocative segment and a neutral segment. Using a forced choice option (mad, sad, scared, happy and ok), children were asked to identify what each puppet was feeling during the evocative segment. Coding responses followed procedures in Denham et al. (1994) and ranged from 0 to 2 for each emotion.
- **Sympathy expression measures:** While watching the evocative videotape, (see above) children's facial expressions were coded using a modified version of Ekman & Friesen's (1975; 1978) facial coding system and following methods from Eisenberg and Fabes (1995). Children's display of sympathy and sadness were combined to create one category indexing sympathy. Children's display of personal distress was also coded.

- **Disappointment Hiding Task:** A display rule task was used in which each child received an unwanted prize to assess children's understanding of *how* they hid their feelings from an adult (Saarni, 1984). Children were asked *HOW* they kept the experimenter from knowing their true feelings. Children's responses were coded on a 3-point scale: (0) children showed no understanding of hiding emotion; (1) children showed some knowledge of hiding feelings, yet all responses referred to a *verbal* channel only; and (2) children referred to manipulating facial expressions (e.g., "I didn't act sad").

Results

- *No* gender differences
- *No* SES effects with any of the variables
- See **Table 1** for means and standard deviations of family functioning & social-cognition variables
- Some *age effects* were present

Negative subscale of SEFQ was positively related to age, possibly indicating higher power assertion strategies with older children.

Emotion labeling task scores were positively related to age.

- **Table 2 shows the inter-correlations among family characteristic variables**

Negative subscale of the SEFQ and the assessment of marital satisfaction were negatively related to marital conflict tactics.

- **Table 3 shows the inter-correlations on the social cognition measures.**

Both the emotion labeling task and the disappointment hiding task were positively related to children's expression of sympathy during the puppet vignettes, and negatively related to their expression of distress.

Children's performance on the disappointment hiding task and the negative emotion labeling task were *not* correlated, indicating that these measures were tapping different abilities.

- **Table 4 shows the correlations between children's scores on the social cognition measures and the scores on the family questionnaires.**

The negative subscale of the SEFQ was negatively related to children's performance on the negative emotion labeling task and their expression of sympathy.

The positive subscale of the SEFQ was also negatively related to performance on the negative emotion labeling task.

Marital conflict tactics were negatively related to children's performance on the disappointment hiding task.

Marital satisfaction was positively related to children's expression of sympathy and negatively related to their expression of distress.

Discussion

The results of the investigation revealed individual differences in children's social cognition and suggested that these individual differences were in part related to different dimensions of family experiences (Ratner & Stettner, 1991). The present study expanded upon past research by using measures of marital functioning not previously examined in conjunction with display rule understanding and emotion labeling, and the presentation of an emotionally-evocative situation that utilized fewer explicit cues concerning the emotions being expressed. Given the importance of emotion understanding, including how emotional responses are related to other behaviors (e.g., competent social interactions; Dunn, 1995; Garner, Robertson, & Smith, 1997; Watson, Nixon, Wilson, Capage, in press), more research is needed to elucidate important contextual influences impinging upon a child's emotional development.

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